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Slowly But Surely, City's Economic Development Effort Progressing

RECORDER STAFF REPORT

Even after two years of controlled economic development from the Economic Development Committee, many Kingsburg citizens still fail to see the relevance or visibility of the organization, since often the committee's efforts are not always in plain sight.

According to Economic Development Coordinator Jolene Polyack, the city of Kingsburg's economic development efforts have been strategic and orchestrated for more than two years. Still, some have commented that they haven't seen very much activity over that time.

Polyack offers that there has actually been a plethora of action "it's just commonly kept confidential until final agreements are made. The Economic Development Committee has been very methodical in its efforts to bring businesses to our city, which will embrace our heritage and meet our expectations for quality..."

Some of the committee's efforts have included:

- Promoting local dining. Kingsburg offers 38 local restaurants, 24 of which are locally owned and operated. "... We have positioned Kingsburg as a Destination Dining city. Whenever possible, we promote this fact. Since we have begun this promotion we have steadily seen an increase in the sales tax revenue generated by restaurants over the past eight quarters." Polyack points to the Rotary Club's annual food and wine tasting event as another device that has been helpful in the promotion efforts.

- Big box retailers. According to Polyack, while Kingsburg has not successfully landed any big box retailers, they have seriously examined the town and considered possible locations. "Several major, big box retailers, including Target and Home Depot have seriously considered locating in Kingsburg. While we have not had any of them actually locate here, the fact that they have come to our city, sat down with us and truly considered Kingsburg is a major step for us. We were not on anyone's radar screen two years ago."

Several key local, regional and statewide developers have looked at Kingsburg for future projects. Some of them are actually in escrow at this point, but Polyack is quick to note that they can't go public with any of these developments before escrow closes, or they may risk losing those businesses.

Polyack notes that the city of Kingsburg, in partnership with the developer of the Kingsburg Business Park, now has a retail shopping survey that provides a clearer picture of the type of shoppers they have in this community and the type of shopper who travels

to Kingsburg. The information sketches a compelling story to tell to retailers when they are considering property here.

Additionally, the EDC attends two retailer trade shows per year in order to further the awareness of Kingsburg as a growing, developing community. "Having an established presence within the retail industry is critical to our success," Polyack says.

"We've talked of having a hotel off of Highway 99 north of Kmart for years. A hotel is a very large investment and takes time to put together. There are at least two elements to a hotel, an operator and a flag. The property is currently in escrow with an operator. The plan is to initially have one 3-story hotel with a conference center. We are in the process of determining which flag is the brand name of the hotel that the facility will operate under. While much work has been completed on the hotel, there is still much to be done."

Polyack notes that the Kingsburg Business Park has been another hot bed of activity which has seen a flurry of activity lately. "We're very excited about the retail and business interest for the park. It's been somewhat slow to the eye because of the PG&E backlog. Many businesses are ready to start building once the infrastructure is complete," she said. Sonic Burger is expected to be one of the first businesses to break ground.

The old Cotton Oil site at Sierra & Marion streets is currently in the final stages of development planning. A Walgreen's with a drive-through pharmacy and a strip mall have already been submitted and approved by the Planning Commission. Development is expected to commence at the site in the near future.

Marion Street, between Sierra Street and Draper Street, will soon have a design plan created that will help the city share its vision for this stretch of development, Polyack said.

"We've met with three major developers to discuss the transition of Marion into a gateway to our downtown. We have a list of prospective retailers that we will approach when our planning process is complete. We are primarily focusing on regionally owned businesses that are looking to expand to a second or third store. We believe the local flavor anticipated along Marion will be an enhancement to our unique image as a Swedish Village and a Destination Dining city," said Polyack.

And speaking of the Swedish Village image that Kingsburg enjoys, there has been some concern stated about dropping the Swedish theme in new developments. The Economic Development Committee believes that the Swedish Village theme is part of what distinguishes Kingsburg from other small communities. Polyack said that from a marketing perspective, it is a strong brand identifier and should continue to be embraced. So, they're going to do everything in their power to continue with that theme.

Although through no effort of the Economic Development Committee, the train depot project's apparent progression will aid them when selling Kingsburg to outsiders. "It reflects on our commitment to invest in our own community, something developers like

to see," Polyack noted. "Our downtown is vibrant at nearly any time of day. While many small city downtown areas are experiencing vacancies, ours tends to remain full and successful when compared to others. As a group, the sales revenue has been on a steady increase over the last few quarters."

Outside the city's immediate limits, the Golden State Corridor is experiencing interest from all sorts of businesses and investors. As the Fresno/Clovis area becomes saturated and large Los Angeles developers begin to get serious about the region, local developers are becoming more and more interested in the smaller communities, especially those who border on Highway 99. Polyack notes that, if the efforts to upgrade the Highway to an Interstate are successful, it will bolster the attractiveness to developers.

The Guardian and Sun Maid annexation is progressing very well. Polyack notes that the economic development benefits of having this area annexed are: One, the community will have more land to offer interested parties going forward; two, more control over the type of businesses that locate along the corridor; three, the opportunity to keep Kingsburg's upscale image intact through the Architectural Design Committee's influence on future development.

So, in all, economic development generally travels on a slow ship. In order for developers and businesses to invest thousands or even millions into property, they have to go through a lengthy process that doesn't happen overnight. A bad reputation can often be hard to overcome. Polyack says that Kingsburg has decades of anti-growth perception to overcome, but they are definitely on the right path and enjoying the strong relationships they're building within the economic development arena.